

to see without my eyes

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by [sassyneki](#)

Summary

Whoever said falling out of love is easy has never had their heart broken.

(sequel to "keep the water warm")

Notes

[sufjan stevens - mystery of love](#)

this is a sequel! can stand alone as well, but best if you read the previous fic first.

Chapter 1: june 2020

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Summer in Seoul is always a suffocating affair. It's already hot enough with buildings trapping heat between their cracks, but it's made even worse with the multitudes of people crowding the one and only path he can take to school. All Jeongguk is wearing is a thin white t-shirt and a pair of bermes, the perfect picture of a lazy college student, but the sweat is already starting to seep through the back of his shirt.

"Oppa, you made it," Sooyoung grins, head perking up when she hears the telltale sound of someone frantically plopping into a seat. "Nils is just about to start his presentation."

Life as a postgrad is strange, Jeongguk has to admit. When he graduated three years ago, he didn't think life would be easy, but he definitely hoped that it would be easier—at the time, his heart had still been heavy with lingering want, but he'd believed that diving head-first into the industry, armed with his First Class Honours in Chemistry, would do him some good. Six months on and he found that everything he'd learnt in school was going to waste: no matter how good he was at pipetting samples or writing grant proposals, in the end, it all boiled down to how well he could deal with the politics of the workplace, of people backstabbing each other left and right.

And the realisation that he wouldn't actually be able to do anything useful, nor anything he liked, drove him straight back to school. Almost two years into his PhD and every other day, he still wonders why the hell he signed up for this. But he wouldn't give it up for the world, even if his desk is a mess (an organised one, he reassures himself) and he still has to take graduate classes and he has no idea what he's gonna do for his dissertation.

"Any questions?" Nils asks, once he's done talking about dopamine pathways in drugged mice. Jeongguk likes Nils, he's nice enough, an enthusiastic and awfully smart guy from Germany—he just really has a thing against the ethics review committee.

Jeongguk zones out. It is, after all, the last official day of the semester, and he has no finals. As a graduate student, his summers are more or less nonexistent—he'd be checking in twice a week to help out at the

lab, and he has weekly consultations with his supervisor to actually start working on his dissertation—so he will take this small reprieve, this tiny breather, with all that he can. He'd already given his presentation the week before, so there really is no reason he's here other than the fact that Sooyoung would kick his ass if he skipped class.

Something strikes his shin, hard, and he almost curses out loud before realising he's in a class of six people, including the professor.

"Pay attention," Sooyoung hisses. "I need to get Park as my supervisor, can't have him thinking you're a slacker."

"Yeah, yeah," Jeongguk nods, just to appease her. Sooyoung is great, but sometimes she's just way too tense.

The class ends with all six of them taking a group photo together ("Let's do a we-fie!" Professor Park had suggested, eyes gleaming), and even though Jeongguk isn't a *great* student, he still likes the class enough to put on a bright smile, one arm slung around Sooyoung's shoulders and the other held up in a peace sign.

"So, what do you want to do?" Sooyoung asks, as they head out to the hallway, locking her elbows with his. "Last day of school and all."

"I don't know, I kinda wanna just lie down and play Overwatch," Jeongguk jokes. He holds his hands up in surrender when she throws him the nastiest look. "Just kidding. We can have dinner at that new Thai place that opened up? I have to go find Yoongi-hyung before that, though."

"Nakhon Kitchen?" Her smile is so wide it stretches across her face. "Sounds good. Need me to come with you?"

"It's okay," Jeongguk replies. "I agreed to have a meal with him two months back, or something. He's so busy these days, he had to *pencil me in*."

Sooyoung shakes her head in mock aghast. "That's terrible. I'll see you later, then."

"See you, too," Jeongguk smiles, bringing her in and placing a gentle kiss on her forehead.

Yoongi works at this nice, cosy studio that he opened up with Namjoon, and Jeongguk would be lying if he says that he isn't jealous. The company is small and they're only just starting to make some profit, mixing and mastering for those willing to outsource their production, and every time he sees them they're just a little bit thinner, but their eyes are always glowing. He's envious, he admits: to find your passion and be able to chase it is something few people ever get to do, and even if Jeongguk is happy for his hyungs, he can't help but wish he were in the same position.

He's been to Big Hit a couple of times. It's tucked in one of the winding alleyways in Gangnam, sandwiched between huge bungalows and rundown convenience stores, smack in the middle of one of the most expensive districts in Seoul. It's a funny contrast, whenever he goes to the south of the river. (He tries to convince himself that he doesn't visit often because it is simply so far, but he knows there's another reason, one that is infinitely more painful.)

"Yoongi-hyung!" Jeongguk greets. He's smiling so wide, but he can't help it, he hasn't seen his hyung in a couple of weeks, and he just really wants a Lamb Skewer Catch-up right now.

But that's not Yoongi behind the desk, fumbling with the mountain of documents. It's definitely not Yoongi blasting jazz music throughout the reception of a hip hop music production company, definitely not Yoongi wearing that bewildered look that he hasn't seen in years, but can somehow still remember down to every grain.

See, that's the thing about first loves: you have them, and you lose them, but you never forget them.

He was immortalised back then, just like how this moment is immortalised now. Everything freezes, from the barely discernible flicker of the lights above, to the hover of a hand in the air, midway through a wave, to his wide, unblinking eyes, as large and bright as Jeongguk remembered.

After what seems like forever, someone speaks.

"I'm not Yoongi-hyung," he says. The yellow hoodie is gigantic on him, practically swallows him up, and when he brings his hand down, the sleeves fall down to form adorable sweater paws.

"No, you're not."

There is a moment in the air that hangs between them, a note waiting to be played.

“Hi, my name is Kim Taehyung,” Taehyung greets, as if Jeongguk would ever have forgotten him and the gaping hole he’d left behind. He holds out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

What is this? Why are they acting like they’re strangers, when they knew each other inside out a forever ago?

“I’m Jeon Jeongguk,” he replies, regardless. He can feel his teeth digging into his bottom lip, waiting. “It’s great to meet you too.”

Taehyung stares back at him, eyes wide, skin smooth and golden, full mouth curving into a hesitant smile. Things have changed so much: Jeongguk is no longer the boy he was, lost and angry and frustrated with the world, and he has no idea what Taehyung is like now, face still the same but somehow different, eyes still bright but somehow duller. So before he loses the bravado, he asks, “Do you want to go out for coffee later?”

“Okay,” Taehyung says, and Jeongguk doesn’t expect it. He doesn’t expect the brilliant rectangular smile that he’d tucked away years ago, either. “I think we’ll be great friends.”

It’s now that Jeongguk notices how fast his pulse is racing, how hard his heart is hammering.

“I think so too.”

“You told me Taehyung-hyung was working at your company.”

“I did.”

“You didn’t tell me he would be working there *today*.”

“Jeongguk,” Yoongi sighs, reaching for a sip of the beer. Figures Yoongi, of all people, would drink at three in the afternoon. “I’m not at liberty to disclose my employee’s schedules.”

“It was completely embarrassing,” Jeongguk groans, throwing his forearms onto the table and burying his face into his hands. A year or

two ago, Jeongguk wouldn't have dared to be so open around Yoongi, not at all; but now, he's probably the hyung that Jeongguk is the most comfortable around, even if he does like to ruffle Jeongguk's hair every time they meet. "I was completely embarrassing."

"I'm sure you were fine, kid," Yoongi reassures, smiling. Then he leans back, and the expression on his face turns pensive. "You know, it's about time you two talked."

Jeongguk faces his problems head on. It's a hard lesson that he had to learn a forever ago, and he hasn't forgotten it since. He likes to deal with things as they come and move on right after, leaving them behind in the past—after all, that is how you make progress. But for some reason, even when his parents told him Taehyung had started to come for dinner regularly, even when Yoongi and Namjoon told him Taehyung was working for them now, that he was back from abroad—he just could not confront Taehyung.

All it would have taken was a phone call, or a text message, and that would be it. But he still couldn't do it. He doesn't even know if he can.

Taehyung was the one exception, and Taehyung is still the only exception.

"I don't know, hyung," Jeongguk huffs. "I asked him out for coffee on impulse, but I don't know what I have to do next."

"You don't 'have' to do anything, you know. Nothing's set in stone." Yoongi takes a bite of a lamb skewer and chews for a bit before frowning at his dongsaeng. "Do you regret meeting him again?"

"I don't know." It's so weird. His life has been hanging in this nice, comfortable equilibrium for the past year or so, and just a simple three-minute meeting with a single person has managed to upset it. "I thought I'd moved on? And I kind of have, I think, I like Sooyoung and lot and I'm okay with where I am, it's just—seeing him, talking to him, it's like I'm young and dumb and angry at the world all over again."

"You're still young and dumb," Yoongi points out.

"That was unnecessary," Jeongguk replies, and feels his mouth involuntarily transforming into a pout. "I don't know if I've made a mistake, asking to meet again."

"You never know unless you try." Ever the optimist, this hyung. "And

regardless of whether you want to face it or not, Tae is still a part of your family, and he's also your friend, whether it's now or in the past or whenever. You can't keep running from that."

And Yoongi's right, as he often is. Sometimes it feels like his hyung is much wiser beyond his twenty-nine years.

"I'm sorry, I asked to meet you and I've made this all about me," Jeongguk apologises, even though he knows Yoongi has the largest soft spot for him and will deny the statement to the ends of the earth and back. Yoongi opens his mouth as if to say something, but Jeongguk continues, "How's the company? How are your children?"

"Stop calling them my children, I feel old enough already," Yoongi scolds. "They're doing good. We brought in a new boy from Australia; he's danced before and he has a good voice, but he can still barely speak Korean at all. Namjoon's the only one he's spoken more than two sentences to."

"How old is he?"

"Fifteen, sixteen. I feel bad, sometimes," Yoongi admits, "taking them away from their schooling days. But they're earnest and willing to work hard, so we'll do our best to give them a chance to grow and learn."

Seeing his hyung like that is remarkable. It's a wonder what five years can do to a person, Yoongi having grown from wearing a stoic poker face all the time, to someone whose face softens when he talks about his poodle or the young musicians he's taken under his wing. For most, the years harden and jade you into a cynic; for Yoongi, the years have been kind, as if the hardships have soothed him.

"Maybe I should come by and visit one day," Jeongguk ponders out loud. "I haven't even been to the studio since you guys renovated it."

"You should," Yoongi agrees. "Maybe you can join Hoseok and help them with dance training for a bit."

This is nice, Jeongguk thinks. It's been so long since he sat down with Yoongi properly and talked, without the guise of someone's birthday party or the cover of alcohol.

"Don't try to change the topic, though," Yoongi points out. Then a sigh, "Did you really think I wouldn't notice?"

“Well, I hoped,” Jeongguk shrugs sheepishly.

“I know you better than you know yourself at this point.”

Unfortunately, Yoongi is correct, yet again. “And I know you will be in a better place once you actually sort things out with Taehyung.”

“The first time we met, it was summer too, right?” Taehyung’s laugh is tight, like the sound had to be wrenched out of his throat.

“Yeah,” Jeongguk replies automatically.

Seeing Taehyung after so long—his hair now a dusky shade of brown, sitting opposite him in the coffee shop down the road and sunlight hitting his eyes so that he has to squint just a little bit, like nothing is wrong, nothing at all—is strange. It has been five years without Taehyung in his life, at least physically, and it’s not like in those novels where Jeongguk’s knees give way when Taehyung smiles, or his heart skips a beat, but—

—but it’s different, in ways both good and bad, and he doesn’t know what to make of it. Jeongguk knows he looks different, and so does Taehyung. Five years and a yellow brick path into adulthood will do that to people.

“I don’t think I ever got to apologise,” Taehyung says softly. He resolutely stares at the cinnamon roll on his plate. “For last time.”

“It’s okay.” Even though Jeongguk doesn’t really know himself. “Yoongi-hyung told me you travelled a lot?”

“I tried to work for a bit, but being an accountant just isn’t for me, I guess,” Taehyung chuckles. He sits back, forearms now relaxed. “Travelled around for a bit after that before I started working at Big Hit.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Everywhere? Or wherever I felt like going, at the time.” His eyes stray to somewhere far away, and the hint of a smile pulls at his mouth. Jeongguk wishes he knew what it is like to wander. “Did you know there are so many people just travelling without a plan? I met so

many, but no one else from Korea.”

This is when it hits him, that Taehyung has spent half a decade without him, and he, half a decade without Taehyung. Five years of silence and not knowing what was going on; for all he did know, from this one conversation, Taehyung could be a completely different person. From the way his tongue curls around tales of his travels with wistful wanderlust, romanticism anchoring him to some place and time that is no longer here—the feeling of wanting to know that Taehyung, the one traversing from Myanmar to Iran to Slovakia, hits Jeongguk sudden and fast.

Taehyung is a wealth of stories. Jeongguk asks him about Japan, the first place Taehyung had left for, and immediately his eyes brighten up and he looks like a little child all over again, speaking so fast, hands moving so fast. He smiles as he talks about the people in Myanmar, and the kindness with which they treated a clueless foreigner with broken English.

“I did a trek for three days and two nights,” Taehyung tells. “My guide was lovely, she wore this giant hat the whole time and would run up the hilly paths and try to get us to reach the top before the sun set.”

He talks about Angkor Wat and the throngs of tourists, about getting ripped off when he tried to hail a tuk-tuk to the airport. He talks about being offered ecstasy in one of the clubs on Pub Street in Siem Reap and sneaking out to take a smoke instead, because he recognised none of the songs they were playing. He talks about the Kiwi Tour in New Zealand and how he met friend after friend without knowing their names, and only where they came from.

Taehyung is glowing, a light fade of happiness surrounding him as he speaks, but Jeongguk swears he *shines* when he talks about the people he’s met. The eighteen-year old German girl fresh out of high school with dreams of becoming a lawyer. The two Korean boys who had just finished their military service and were trekking through Thailand before having to return to the ruthless education system. The sixty-year old Japanese man who took a trip to a different country every year, but always came back to China every other year. The Italian woman who worked at the reception of one of his hostels, and regaled him with stories of how she had quit her job and trekked the entire Silk Road, alone.

Jeongguk was right. Taehyung really has changed. There are remnants of the old Taehyung, in the way he tries to pull his expressions taut,

the way he moves his hands so fast and his eyes grow wide. But the sheer happiness with which this new Taehyung reminisces his past years makes Jeongguk wish he had been there too.

“I love travelling, and meeting new people, but it wasn’t like I could do it for a living.” Taehyung sips at his drink: a matcha soy latte, he had explained earlier, because he had met a vegan girl and fell in love with soy milk, even if he loved his meat too much. “Money was running out, and I had to stop eventually. So here I am, working for Big Hit.”

Jeongguk doesn’t know what to say. Even as a floater, a drifter, Taehyung sounds like he has everything together. He knows who he is and what he wants, and Jeongguk hates that he is envious.

“My life isn’t anywhere near as exciting,” Jeongguk starts. “I realised I didn’t like working in the industry that much, so I’m working on a PhD now, and hopefully I can go into research next time.”

It’s strange, that it is so easy to talk with Taehyung, even after everything. That one year had felt like a dream at times and a nightmare at others; it still feels the same. The memory of it isn’t as clear as day, there are moments that he finds impossible to picture, but he remembers how it had felt as if the stutter of his heart and the tightening of his throat were carved into his bones. He wonders, how is it that they can talk like this now, like that year had barely happened, a series of blurry, washed-out days and nights.

“You’re lucky,” Taehyung says, like he truly believes it. “You’ve always known what you wanted and gone after it.”

“I’m not so sure you’re right,” Jeongguk replies, and he’s about to continue, when his phone beeps and the screen lights up with a new text message. It’s Sooyoung. “Sorry, I need to reply this.”

“Go ahead.”

Jeongguk scans the text, and lets out a soft “Oh, shit” when he realises he has all but forgotten about his dinner date with Sooyoung. He glances at the time; it’s already half past six, and they were supposed to meet at Nakhon Kitchen in fifteen minutes, and he’s a good half hour bus ride away from the place.

“Is everything okay?”

“I forgot I had dinner plans, and I’m going to be late.” Jeongguk sighs.

“We can catch up more another time.”

“Yeah, of course,” Taehyung nods, although the glimmer in his eyes seems to have flickered out. “Maybe when we both go back for dinner.” He says this with a small voice, like he barely dares to let the words out. “I think they’d like it.”

Jeongguk stumbles as he’s getting up from the booth. Breath caught in throat, foot caught in mouth. “Y-yes, sure. That sounds good.”

“Actually,” Taehyung starts, voice back to normal, and this is how Jeongguk knows the topic is going to change, “do you want a ride? I got my license before I started travelling.”

Beggars can’t be choosers, so Jeongguk agrees. But when they head outside and Taehyung presents his baby, aptly named Hot Star, his jaw drops open.

“A motorbike?” Jeongguk feels like fainting. “Since when do you know how to ride a motorbike?”

“Since I realised I can’t rely on public transport and taxis the whole time.” Taehyung fishes out two helmets and hands one to Jeongguk. There is a caricature of Donald Trump on the back, and it stares at Jeongguk as if daring him to put it on. “Did you know that they announce closures for the subway in London in advance, because the workers want to protest? And that the tunnels in Singapore have gotten flooded?” He shakes his head. “It’s a mad world out there.”

Taehyung hops on and pats the backseat. Gingerly, carefully, Jeongguk straddles and feels like his chest is about to burst. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands.

“You can just grab the sides of the seat,” Taehyung explains, like he’s read Jeongguk’s mind. “I won’t go too fast, and this area isn’t so crowded.”

The ride is crazy. Even with the helmet on, the wind in his face is a strong chill that cuts into his cheeks, and he squints throughout the entire ride because he can barely keep his eyes open without tearing up. Taehyung drives like a madman; his ‘not very fast’ is clearly relative, because he weaves through Seoul traffic like navigating a video game, and when Jeongguk yells at him to slow down, he simply laughs out loud, baritone laughter carried away with the wind. The whole time, Jeongguk’s fingers dig into the side of the seat—for a moment or two, he thinks about holding onto Taehyung’s shoulders,

maybe even his waist, but figures that he is already about to get one heart attack from the ride, he doesn't need another one—and when they finally arrive, there are angry red imprints in his palms from where he had clutched the leather so hard.

“Wasn't that fun?” Taehyung laughs, the sound like thick honey.

“That was fucking terrifying,” Jeongguk corrects, taking the helmet off. He runs a hand through his hair, and is glad to note that no, he does not have helmet hair, thank god. “Thanks for the ride, though. Even if I felt like I was about to die the entire time.”

“Hey, I got you here in ten minutes,” Taehyung protests. He leans against the side of Hot Star, his own helmet in hand, brown hair rustling in the wind, long body stretched out, the very picture of someone who belongs on a magazine cover instead of behind the counter of a small company. “So, who are you having dinner with?”

Jeongguk had expected this topic to come up, but he didn't quite expect it so soon, and it feels like his heart is caught in his throat, his jaw is locked—

“That'd be me,” someone says, a bright, lilting sound. “Nice to meet you, I'm Sooyoung.”

Sooyoung appears at Jeongguk's side, and reaches a hand out to Taehyung.

“This is Taehyung, my—my stepbrother,” Jeongguk fumbles, and he prays no one noticed. “And Tae, this is Sooyoung,” oh, fuck, he doesn't know how to do this, “my girlfriend.”

For an indecipherable moment, no one speaks. It must have only been milliseconds, but it felt like forever, three bodies frozen in the moment and something heavy hanging in the air. Then it is over, and Taehyung is grinning at her, that full rectangular smile that makes his large eyes narrow into slits and his face ten years younger.

“Hi Sooyoung,” Taehyung greets. “Don't let him fool you, he calls me 'Tae', but I'm two years older.”

“I'll keep that in mind.” Sooyoung's eyes twinkle, and suddenly Jeongguk is struck by how similar they look. “Oppa is never one for honorifics, and I always tell him he's going to get into trouble one day.”

Taehyung hums. “Sorry to have kept him back. I’d been travelling for a while and we happened to meet.”

“No worries.” She steps back and stands closer to Jeongguk, who has gone as stiff as a rod. “I guess I will be seeing you around more often, then.”

“I guess so too.”

With a final wave, Taehyung speeds off on Hot Star, and it is then that Jeongguk realises he really *had* been going slower for his sake, what the fuck, he’s going to break his legs at this rate.

And when the shock of the moment dissipated, it finally dawns on him how surreal that whole moment, as short as it had been, really was. His current partner talking to his ex-*something*, were they ever really partners, or boyfriends, he doesn’t even know, not even now. That they had shook hands, hands that have both been on Jeongguk before, tracing the same ribs and curves of muscle. That they had talked in a perfectly cordial manner, with mouths that had both fused with Jeongguk’s at some point or another.

“Hey, oppa, are you alright?” Sooyoung nudges him. If they were in private, she would probably curl into his side, but one of the things he is glad for is that Sooyoung, like him, shies away from public affection. Words and small touches are enough. “Is it that scary for me to meet your family?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Jeongguk assures, “just a bit winded from the ride.”

“Didn’t peg you for a coward,” she jokes, and he playfully bares his teeth in response. “Didn’t I tell you I have a bike licence as well?”

You learn new things every day, Jeongguk figures. And for the rest of the evening, Sooyoung is lovely and the food is lovely, and if it is Taehyung’s smile and the excitement with which he talked that stay in the back of Jeongguk’s mind the whole time—well, there’s not much he can do about it, except deal with it as it comes.

Chapter End Notes

so it's been 52 years since i last posted something, and 83 years since the final chapter of "keep the water warm", but here goes nothing.

a bit of an update on my life: i'm in my second year of uni and

doing research as well (and i also have dance, running, etc.) so basically, i'm just really busy. trying to get into writing more and i wanted to give more closure to ktww!taekook. for those who have been with me since ktww, please understand that this will be paced a lot slower, not as uh, wild???, as ktww. it's more of a jeongguk-centric maturation coming-to-terms-with-life-and-things kinda story. it seems like the busier i get, the more of an urge i get to write, so hopefully chapters will come out in due time, and for now it's planned for 5-ish chapters so it won't be super long either. i also have another oneshot in the works (those who follow my twitter will more or less know what it's about lol) that will hopefully be up soon too.

on chapter one: no, you didn't read wrong, yes, jeongguk has a girlfriend. if you guys are seeking explanations, just know that everything will be laid out in due time :) and it's been five years, the characters have all changed in some way or another.

on writing: i think my writing style has changed somewhat (reading ktww makes me cringe a lot and i might go back and edit it someday), and that, combined with the fact that this is going to be less intense of a story, means that this fic will (again, like i said) pretty different from the original. just a heads up haha

anyway!!! i haven't written in really long and tbh i feel extremely rusty, but to all readers old and new, thank you so much for reading and i hope this will be worth your while.

as usual, any comments, kudos, bookmarks, and subscribes are very much appreciated!!! come talk to me on [twitter](#), and if you'd like, you can buy me a coffee on [ko-fi](#) too, god knows i sustain off ice americanos and viceroys nowadays

Chapter 2: july 2020, i

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A month is not a terribly long time, but the next time Jeongguk bumps into Taehyung, it's July, and the funny thing is, it feels like it has been forever.

(He guesses part of the blame is his own. Taehyung had tried to reach out to him a few times, extending a welcoming arm, but it was always some appointment or another that clashed, a lab session or a consult with his supervisor, that dove in last minute. That one coffee meet-up decades ago had ended on a strange note—not that it was bad, or anything. But the last thing he remembers is watching Taehyung speed off on his motorbike without a helmet, brown hair caught in the wind, with his girlfriend's elbow hooked into his, and he's certain that would make for a strange experience for anyone.)

The view from the rooftop of the Big Hit building is underwhelming. Only six storeys up, so there's not much to begin with, but for kilometres on end, all Jeongguk can see are buildings of similar height and colour. When he catches sight of a figure in a corner, leaning over the railing, he pauses.

"Tae?" he calls out.

Still swathed in the same bright yellow hoodie, Taehyung turns around, and the way the wind catches on his hair reminds Jeongguk of how he'd rode off on his motorbike.

"Jeongguk," Taehyung nods, and attempts a smile. A small one, but Jeongguk will take what he can get. The cigarette hangs between his fingers. "What are you doing up here?"

"Smoke break," Jeongguk shrugs. He had popped by to have dinner with Yoongi and Namjoon, but they were still finishing up a track, and told him to go "explore the building". "And you? Slacking off?"

"That's me," Taehyung laughs, but his eyes look far away.

It's strange. Taehyung on the rooftop, smoke trailing from his mouth, gaze somewhere in the distance.

It's been a month, but Jeongguk hasn't come to terms with the fact that he had met Taehyung a month ago, much less the fact that their platonically incestuous social circle means that Taehyung is a part of his life again, whether he wants it or not.

His chest feels a little tight, and words come out softer, like they don't dare to escape his throat, but it's not like—it's not like he's in love with Taehyung, or anything like that. He doesn't want to push Taehyung against the nearest wall, he doesn't wish for Taehyung's body encasing his in a nest of pillows on a Saturday morning. Nothing like that. But instead, it is a weird limbo, something hanging in the air and a red thread between them, one that makes him reminisce as much as anticipate.

"Join me?" Taehyung asks, so quiet and low and subdued that it nearly disappears with the summer breeze. "We can swap."

Jeongguk leans against the railings, cold metal against his forearms, and swaps his Viceroy for Taehyung's Marlboro. Funny what they have come to, five years on, exchanging cigarettes on a rooftop in Gangnam.

"This is my favourite place." Taehyung bites into the menthol ball—Jeongguk stores that away from future use, what kind of person bites the ball instead of pressing it. "I've always had a thing for rooftops, especially while travelling. At hostels, the rooftops are always crowded, and the one in Myanmar even had napping beds and beanbags. But in other places, rooftops are quiet and windy and at night it's beautiful."

Jeongguk hums in agreement and tries not to choke on the red that Taehyung had handed him. "I bet you can see the sunset from here."

"You can, actually," Taehyung smiles. "In fifteen minutes, over on the left. Sometimes I stash beers in the corner and come up when there are no appointments or anything."

"How is it, working here?"

"I'm already sick of Yoongi-hyung and Namjoon-hyung's faces." Taehyung laughs and Jeongguk thinks it's one of the most beautiful things he has seen. "Everyone is really nice, and I make enough to get by, but it feels like I'm just procrastinating, you know? Like—am I really going to be a receptionist for the rest of my life?"

"If you enjoy it, then that's not a problem, right?"

“I don’t *hate* it, if that’s what you’re asking.” He lets out a sigh. “But I can’t help but feel like I should be doing more. Namjoon-hyung and Yoongi-hyung have built up a music company, you’re doing a Phd—holy shit, you’re going to be *Doctor* Jeon, what the fuck?—Seokjin-hyung works for fucking *Hyundai*, and he still manages to have a work-life balance. Even Jimin is happy with his job and even has time to sub in at the studio for Hoseok-hyung when he can.”

Taehyung stubs the cigarette on the railing and pops the stub into a plastic cup on the floor, one full of Marlboros soaked in water. “It’s just—everyone has their shit together, but I’m still drifting around, doing jackshit with my ‘college education’.” He rolls his eyes and says the phrase with air quotes. “Everyone has something, except me.”

Maybe this is what lies behind Taehyung’s eyes. Jeongguk knew that travel changes people, and that it changed Taehyung, but to see him go from the kind of person who breaks into the university at night to someone who seems—not broken, not really, but infinitely reflective, like seeing the rest of the world had made him realise how small his own really was—makes his heart ache. That the faraway look that seems to plague Taehyung is because his heart isn’t in Seoul, and that, in fact, he doesn’t know where his heart is at all.

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” Jeongguk says, stubbing his own cigarette. “Just because you’re a receptionist doesn’t mean you’re any lesser than the rest of us.”

“Yeah, but I don’t exactly have a burning passion for being a receptionist. It’s not like I leap for joy every time I have to redirect a phone call or double-check the visitor list,” Taehyung spits.

Jeongguk wants to reach out. Taehyung tries to hide it, but Jeongguk still catches the clench of his fist, and he knows Taehyung well enough that when he unfurls his palm, angry red welts will line the heart of it. He wants to reach out, to grab Taehyung’s hand and soothe it open and tell him that it will be okay, but it has been a long time since they were close enough for him to do that.

“What about music?” Jeongguk asks, because if there was a time that he truly saw Taehyung happy and content, it was when he was busking.

“I’ve kinda stopped,” Taehyung admits. “Yoongi-hyung taught me how to do some stuff in the studio, but I’m already bothering them so much, I can’t keep asking him to let me use the studio. Equipment

isn't cheap either, and my guitar was stolen somewhere in Thailand."

"If you want, I can pass you my guitar," Jeongguk replies. "Well, it's not really mine. My roommate left it behind when he moved out." He leaves out the part where he didn't dare to throw it away, despite not knowing how to play it, because it reminded him too much of the streets of Hongdae and nimble fingers dancing across the strings. "I don't really use it anyway."

Taehyung's eyes light up. "Seriously? You'd do that?"

"Yeah, why not." *For you? Of course.* "It's just sitting at home collecting dust."

Taehyung grins, large and wide, and Jeongguk never knew making someone else happy would make his chest ache in the best way possible.

"I can't believe you." Jimin shakes his head in very real, very genuine disappointment. "We haven't met up for two months! You blue-ticked me! My own flesh and blood!"

"I'm pretty sure you didn't raise me," Jeongguk points out. "If anything, it's Seokjin-hyung."

"You take that back!" Jimin sobs into the sleeve of his sweater, one that falls way past his fingertips. "I can't believe my own *child* would disrespect me like this."

Five years ago, Jeongguk had met everyone through Taehyung. Even when everyone else had found out about their unconventional relationship, they had stood by the two of them, and when Taehyung upped and disappeared after graduating, it was like everyone had adopted Jeongguk to fill in the hole that Taehyung had left behind.

Especially Jimin, who was convinced of their familial bond through sheer virtue of them both being from Busan and took Jeongguk under his wing. His last two years of college were spent sweating it out in the dance studio with Jimin and Hoseok every day, two hyungs looking after their child.

“Sorry, hyung.” Jeongguk tries to apologise, but can’t help but break into peals of laughter. “Won’t happen again.”

“You’ve said that the past four times we met,” Jimin deadpans. “Is grad school really that crazy?”

“I’m in the lab pretty much every day,” Jeongguk shrugs. “It’s a full-time job, really. I’m lucky that this summer isn’t so insane.”

“Yah, summer started last month, and you couldn’t find time to meet up until July?”

“I’m a popular person, what can I say?” Jeongguk grins, although it’s really because he’s been bumming around at home and pestering Yoongi. (Yoongi is his favourite hyung, simply because he always treats Jeongguk to lamb skewers, but don’t let Jimin know that.) Sooyoung tries her best to get Jeongguk’s lazy ass out of the house, but air conditioning is too attractive to resist. “How’s everything at the office?”

“Meh, as usual,” Jimin sighs. “Too much politics, so I’m thinking about just taking the off-site jobs. They pay better anyway, and I won’t have to deal with everyone.”

“First time I’m hearing you not wanting to be around people,” Jeongguk remarks. “How scandalous.

“You wouldn’t want to deal with this bunch either if you were in my position.” Jimin takes a sip of his coffee. “Sometimes I wish I went into dance full-time instead, but I actually enjoy fieldwork.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how much does it suck to do what you love and still get paid?”

“What kind of disrespect—” Jimin smacks Jeongguk’s shoulder. Jeongguk almost keels over; he often forgets how much strength Jimin has, despite being half a head shorter. “You do the same thing, don’t even try to lie. You get paid to *study*.”

“It’s barely anything,” Jeongguk counters, but he does get enough stipend from the university to make do. “How is Hoseok-hyung? I haven’t seen him in a while.”

Jimin launches into a spiel about how Hoseok is busy preparing for the dance studio’s first ever recital, sweater paws flying about as he animates his story. This is what makes summers for him: spending

time with his hyungs, not having to worry about submitting another dissertation draft or rushing to consults with his supervisor or dealing with undergraduates that can't tell a Bunsen burner from a lighter.

The thing is, Jeongguk can't fault Jimin for blaming him for being a flake. He's too lazy most of the time, and even though he knows they all care for him—and he, for them—and that they would bring him doengjang jjigae in the worst of storms with a single phone call, he can't help but feel like a secondary character in their family, one that seemed an impenetrable circle long before they met. All of them had known each other beforehand, and only Jeongguk was the sole outsider, stumbling upon all of them by chance just by virtue of Taehyung.

And for the past few years, Taehyung was merely a ghost. One that sought refuge in his mind and immortalised himself in late nights and soft whispers, but a ghost nonetheless. For Jeongguk to practically take Taehyung's place amongst everyone else was a frightening thought. It's still a frightening thought.

"Hey, you still with me?" Jimin asks, waving his small hand in front of Jeongguk's face. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

"Uh, just," Jeongguk fumbles, "what I'm going to eat for dinner."

"You're still a growing child, I swear. I wish I still had your kind of metabolism," Jimin sighs wistfully.

"I'm only two years younger."

"And that's more than a thousand fewer bowls of rice," Jimin points out. "Anyway, as I was saying, Hobi wanted to ask if you could help out. He's too busy with the recital and you have the whole summer free, pretty much."

Jeongguk tries his best to remember what Jimin is talking about but comes up with nothing. "Uh, help out with what?"

"You really weren't listening, were you?" The words are more contemplative than disapproving. "Help out at Big Hit, with the trainees. You're a great dancer—don't give me that look, you know you are—and Hobi will be too busy with the studio recital and studio classes to train up the kids. It's just twice a week, basics and choreography, whatever style you want. The point is to get them exposure. I'd do it, but I actually have a full-time job, so."

“Hey, being a student is a full-time job too!” Jeongguk cries, offended.

“Yeah, but it’s summer. And I know your supervisor is gonna be in Sweden for at least a month and a half, and it’s not like you’re teaching summer tutorials.” Jimin pulls his best puppy-dog face: eyes wide and shiny, lips pursed into a pout. “Plus, you’ll get paid. *And* Yoongi-hyung says he’ll let you crash in his studio.”

That stops Jeongguk in his tracks. “Wait, Yoongi-hyung really said that?”

“He’s just as invested in the kids as anyone else, and even without Hobi to convince him, he already knows how good you are. You were the dance captain in both junior and senior years, and I know you still go back to conduct open classes.”

Other than fucking good things up, the only other thing Jeongguk is good at is dancing. As an undergraduate, he’d felt more like a Dance major than a Chemistry major, and he had thrown so much of himself into the university’s dance team, choreographing and practising through the nights and taking part in competitions whenever he could. Even after coming back as a grad student, he found it in himself to go back for trainings, although his crazy schedule now meant that he couldn’t do it as often during the semester.

“I don’t know.” Jeongguk bites his lip and stares at the cactus on the table. “I’m not sure how good of a mentor I’d be. Look how I turned out.”

“Jeongguk,” Jimin says, grabbing his shoulders and forcing him to meet his hyung’s gaze, “you’ve turned out great.”

The hold on his shoulders loosens, and he drops his eyes back to the table.

“Just come and give it a try,” Jimin suggests. “Hobi’s teaching them on Thursday, and you can come by and watch.”

The thought is tempting. Now that he has more time, this would mean extra cash and the opportunity to dance more.

“Well, if it’s just a trial—”

“Great!” Jimin beams, eyes curling into little crescents and practically jumping out of his seat. “I’ll let Hobi know you will come by on Thursday. I think it’s at three pm, but he will probably text you

anyway. He also said to prepare a piece to share.”

“Wait, he already said to prepare a piece? How is he even so sure I’d
—”

“No more stalling,” Jimin replies. He pushes the cheesecake on the table, untouched since the start of their conversation, toward Jeongguk. Jeongguk loves cheesecake, but it’s been two years since he bought himself a slice. “You deserve more than what you allow yourself.”

Thursday comes too soon. True to his summer self (one of sleeping in till noon and Overwatch binges and forgetting to reply Sooyoung), he spends the days before that lounging around, working off the stress of having to be responsible for a group of young, bright-eyed boys by shouting at his PC. Two nights before, he realised that he actually has to teach a choreography, and immediately went into panic mode.

So it is like this that Jeongguk treads into Big Hit: shoulders tense, hiding inside a hoodie even though it is the sweltering afternoon, running over the piece in his head.

"Jeonggukie?"

Taehyung is behind the counter as usual, headphones around his neck and a pair of silver frames resting on his nose. And maybe it's a trick of the light, but Jeongguk swears that his eyes light up when he notices Jeongguk entering.

"Hyung," Jeongguk smiles, because after their little impromptu session on the rooftop, his stomach is no longer a nervous wreck around Taehyung. His shoulders drop, palms unfurling from fists. "I'm here to accompany Hoseok-hyung?"

"Oh yeah, Hoseok-hyung mentioned that," Taehyung replies. He leans forward on the counter and rests his chin on a palm. "He's already warming up inside."

Two-forty, twenty whole minutes before it even starts. Jeongguk even thought he was too early.

"Nice, thanks." And before he loses the bravado, he asks, "Maybe I'll see you on the rooftop later?"

"You probably will," Taehyung says, eyes sparkling. "I see you didn't bring the guitar today."

"Oh, shit, yeah." Why is Jeongguk stumbling over his words? "Next time, I promise."

"Good." Taehyung's smile stretches long and wide. "Now go find Hoseok-hyung. The studio's in the basement."

"Thanks, Tae."

Jeongguk has been to Big Hit more than a few times, but it was always him waiting around in the reception area for Yoongi to crawl out of the dark hole that is Genius Lab, or that one time Namjoon let him fiddle around with Cubase in his own studio. (Jeongguk has begged Yoongi on more than a few occasions to let him into his studio, but Min Yoongi is a hard man to sway.) And the rooftop too, though that is a recent development.

The dance studio is simple, but that is all you really need. Hardwood floors and a mirror spanning the entire length of the wall, a small set-up of audio equipment and mixers in a corner. It smells vaguely of sweat and damp socks, but as someone who was in a crew once upon a time, he has experienced much worse.

"Hoseok-hyung!" he calls out.

Hoseok is stretching in the center, pulling his arm to the opposite shoulder, house music blasting in the background. A blast of nostalgia hits Jeongguk in the chest, of three, four years back, when he would do the same every evening.

"Jeongguk!" Hoseok grins, as loud and bright as Jeongguk remembers him to be. "I'm glad you decided to come."

"Thank you for having so much c-confidence in me," Jeongguk tries to joke, but it comes out stilted and choked and he feels like a freshman all over again, all jittery nerves and awkward limbs, armed with a deep-seated sense of inferiority.

"I hope you do decide to sub," Hoseok says, and if he notices Jeongguk's slip-up, he says nothing. "It'd be great to have you on the team."

"Is it okay if I show you my piece first?" Jeongguk asks, planting his feet firm on the ground and settling into a plié position, inner thighs stretching taut. "I'm not very sure if it's what you're looking for, or if it's, like, *good* enough—"

"Hey, hey," Hoseok says. He places a warm hand on Jeongguk's shoulder and Jeongguk settles. "Don't worry about it. I'll have a look at it later, it'd be a nice surprise."

"Alright," Jeongguk sighs. He is infinitely grateful for Hoseok's trust in him, but he has been rusty for a long while, and insecurity is a bitch. "Can I put the song on for warm-up, though? I'll probably mark it through a few times."

Hoseok nods in the middle of a front split (what the fuck? Does his hyung even have bones?). As Jeongguk puts on the song, he doesn't know why his fingers fumble, or why they're so *cold* but still sweaty, and it takes him three solid tries to find the song on Spotify because he just blanks out for a heavy moment, and oh god, his choreography will probably be too goddamn easy, and the trainees will just bitch about what a waste of time—

"Nice, I like this song," Hoseok's voice breaks through the middle of his self-deprecation, and Jeongguk's pulse slows down. He sets the phone on the ground and starts marking through the movements.

The trainees enter five minutes before four. The largest of them is a good half a head taller than Jeongguk, all long limbs and sharp angles, and the smallest looks no older than twelve or thirteen.

"Holy shit, there are so many of them? And how young are they? Some of them look like they are still in elementary school."

"Relax, there are only twelve boys," Hoseok reassures him, after he greets the trainees. "The youngest is Alex, he's in his first year of middle school and just moved from Australia. But his hyungs dote on him, so it's okay," he adds, when he sees Jeongguk's eyes widening. "The oldest is—give me a second, I'm getting old, my brain isn't working as well any more—oh, right, Seongjoon! He's turning twenty this year."

"That's still so young, holy shit," Jeongguk breathes. "They're fetuses."

"If you're in the idol business, you have to start young," Hoseok shrugs. "Although we don't have that many trainees, and they're all male, because Joon and Yoongi-hyung want to focus on producing for

other artists first."

Jeongguk turns to look at the group again, and they seem like one giant, overly enthusiastic family. Everyone is dressed similarly, typical dance gear of either knee-length shorts or sweatpants and baggy shirts that hang off their frames. The tallest one has a smaller boy in a headlock, and there are two doing some kind of rapid-fire isolation dance battle, moving their necks back and forth at a ridiculous speed. The rest are either laughing at them or using their phones to record the moment. One boy collapses onto his knees and laughs so hard, Jeongguk is worried he can't breathe.

"Alright, guys, it's three pm," Hoseok raises his voice. "Today we have a friend of mine who will be here to sub in for me when I start getting busier with recitals at Soul Studio. His name is Jeongguk, and he will share a choreography with you guys later on."

"Hello, I'm Jeongguk." He smiles and tries to wave, but doesn't quite know how to do it. "Please take care of me."

A chorus of greetings follow, and in the midst of them, a boy in fire engine-red hair whines, "Aw, but seonsaengnim, we'll miss you when you're gone."

"You can still come for my open classes," Hoseok winks.

Hoseok as a teacher is a complete one-eighty from Hoseok as a friend. Jeongguk knows this, he should know this, since his hyung had been the dance captain when he was a freshman, but seeing it again, a few years on, is something different.

The warmup itself is already brutal, sweat gathering at the base of Jeongguk's neck by the end of it, but the stretching even more so. Jeongguk pales when Hoseok instructs everyone to go down into a center split and proceeds to go around, one by one, pressing down on everyone's backs to widen their split, even sitting down on the more flexible ones. He thinks the words "Relax your hips, bring your chin to the floor" will haunt him for at least a few weeks.

As Jeongguk remembers, Hoseok is big on basics. He spends a lot of time on bounces, isolations, every other kind of fundamental technique that he remembers his hyung drilling into them during late nights in the university's studio. He goes around correcting everyone's form, gentle and patient, but turns stern when he realises a couple of the trainees are zoning out, their posture slipping, movements getting smaller.

(It has been a while since Jeongguk danced with Hoseok. If anything, Hoseok has become even better, even more serious about dance, and with his every movement there is a controlled tightness that says he is not here to fool around. Jeongguk wishes he could find something like that for himself, too.)

By the time it is Jeongguk's turn to share his piece, he is already sweating buckets, undershirt soaked through.

"Go Jeongguk!" someone cheers. And there, in the corner of the studio, is a certain Kim Taehyung, still in the same silver frames, headphones still resting around his neck.

"Tae?" Jeongguk asks. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to watch you," Taehyung grins, leaning against the wall. He gathers his knees to his chest and looks way too comfortable. "I realised I've never seen you dance."

If Jeongguk blushes, then no one says anything about it. He scurries to the front of the studio when Hoseok tells everyone that the water break is over, and they have another one hour of choreography to go through.

"Okay, um, hi guys," Jeongguk says. Everyone looks a little out of it; two hours of bouncing is draining enough as it is. "I'm Jeongguk, as you know, and Hoseok-hyung was my dance captain back in uni. I've been asked to, uh, share? Yeah, to share a choreography with you guys."

He's fumbling so much, oh god, this is so awkward. Hopefully everyone is too tired to notice.

"I don't really specialise in anything specific, but my style is kind of a mash-up between urban and hip hop."

Okay, getting better. Slow and steady.

"Usually I just pick a song and move the way that it sounds, if that makes sense? Like, a certain lyric might mean this to me," he pauses, and does an arm wave that flows into a head isolation, "but it might mean something else to you. So there's no right way to do it. But I think when learning choreography, the best thing to do is take what vocabulary you have learnt from the class and pick the ones that really resonate with you and learn the movement. And also to pay attention to how the instructors move, because it's always good to be

versatile, and it sucks to stick to one style.”

He breathes in deep, and from the back, Taehyung gives him two thumbs up.

“I’ll play the song that we’re doing today, and you guys can listen to the beat and accents before I start teaching the moves,” he ends off, before plugging his phone in.

He’d chosen the song simply because it sounded fun, and he respects the work that Brockhampton put into their aesthetic, their production, their entire creative direction in general. “[Gold](#)” was a track that he had first heard while browsing /r/hiphopheads (because Reddit is where you grow the most, obviously), and immediately, the beat had drawn him in. That, plus the solid verses and catchy hook—and the fact that he only had forty-eight hours to choreograph, he had no time to procrastinate any longer—solidified his song choice.

Choreography is always a tricky thing. The song was settled, but it had been so long and his muscles were no longer as familiar with the strange angles, the kind of power required of movements—strong but controlled, not the kind of explosive displays of strength at the gym. So it had taken a long while, much more than it used to, but once he got into the groove, choreographing was like—it was like writing a story, a chain reaction, one move flowing into the next.

“Okay, so, let’s get started, yeah?”

The class goes by surprisingly smoothly. A few of the boys struggle more, and it’s obvious which ones have dance experience and which don’t. But by the end, every one manages to catch it and execute it decently, and Jeongguk is more than proud of every trainee. They thank him, a few even ask for selfies and ask when he will be coming back next, and when they leave, drenched in sweat but somehow still full of energy (Jihoon—the small, cat-eyed one—even gets lured into a piggyback by Dohyun, a broad-shouldered boy with a mischievous smile), his heart feels so full.

“Great job, Jeongguk,” Hoseok smiles. “I think they really enjoyed your choreography, it’s been a while since they did something more urban.”

“Thanks for letting me share, hyung.” He really, really means it. “It’s been so long.”

“You might feel like you’re rusty, but you don’t seem that way. Don’t

be so tense,” Hoseok says. “Dancing is for expression, and for fun. Don’t make it into something stressful. You’re good.”

“Thank you, hyung,” Jeongguk says.

And he turns away, because any longer and he thinks he might start crying. The class has ended, a load lifted off his shoulders, but the relief isn’t as cathartic as he expected it to be. He wants more, more of whatever this is, dancing and teaching and feeling—not feeling good enough, not really, but feeling like being good enough doesn’t even matter.

“Hey, Guk-ah.” Taehyung’s voice is warm and familiar. “You did well.”

“Thank you,” Jeongguk croaks.

“Rooftop?”

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

shameless plug for gold by brockhampton!!! one of my favourite songs lately and their discography is just A + + in general go check them out

i should really be tagging this "quarter-life crises" and "all the hyungs are whipped for guk" and "taeguk need to #lovethemselves" tbh, and this is turning out to be a LOT more of a character development fic than i expected it to be. everyone is justa struggling millennial, lol, what can i say. i also said this would be 5-ish chapters before....i lied, it will probably be longer, given this pacing. and there will be more sooyoung next chapter!!! (pls don't hate her, she's a sweetheart)

+ i started a sequel not because i'm unsatisfied with the ending of ktww. (i do think the open ending was the most fitting, even if it was met with mixed opinions, as expected) but because i think given ktww as a backstory, exploring taekook in their mid-twenties would be fun. tae and guk here kind of represent two parts of me irl (research and travel, kinda), so it's a good avenue to explore character devt. other things from my irl that are reflected in this: dance, unreasonable love for rooftops, viceroys, americanos.

Chapter 3: july 2020, ii

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You done with your samples?” Sooyoung asks. She shrugs off the lab coat and hangs it back on the rack, removes the latex gloves and tosses them into the bin. “It’s about time we actually ate something.”

“Yeah, just give me a minute,” Jeongguk grits through his teeth. His eyes are starting to hurt from squinting and straining all the time, fingers practically trembling from pipetting sample after sample. He’s starting to believe that his hands are made of latex. “I just have the last few samples to finish up—”

“We’re not behind schedule or anything.” He can hear the frown in her voice even without turning around. “You don’t have to work so hard.”

“Just let me finish this batch,” Jeongguk insists.

It takes him ten more minutes before he finally finishes, and he feels so mentally spent that he really wants nothing more than a warm mug of hot chocolate and an air-conditioned room, complete with a pillow fort. But it’s already eight in the morning and he and Sooyoung had been here since seven the night before, a whole thirteen hours of running tests, and his stomach is already starting to eat away at itself.

“Our stipend is not enough for this,” Jeongguk groans. His joints crack as he stretches, following behind Sooyoung. Her hair had been in a ponytail when they first started, but now it’s in a lazy bun resting against her nape, and that is how he knows she is tired.

“Tell me about it,” she replies, voice hollow. Dead on the inside and outside, which is what an overnight lab session does to you. “I just want to get food and die.”

“Amen,” Jeongguk sighs. He stumbles over thin air and almost falls into Sooyoung, but she catches him right before he crashes. “I guess my body just wants the latter.”

“Be careful,” she scolds, arm locked with his for the rest of the walk.

They settle in a café that is still in the midst of opening, but whose

owners are kind enough to let them in. A million smells hit at once: the fresh hydrangeas in the corner, the bitter, earthy scent of freshly brewed coffee, warm yeast and cinnamon wafting through the air. It figures that they would be the only customers here on a Tuesday morning, and they get the best seat, right next to the window, a few pots of cacti keeping them company.

“What do you want?” Jeongguk asks, after they have sat down in their seats for three solid minutes in silence, contemplating their existence as grad students. “I’ll grab us some food.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Sooyoung replies. Fatigue lines her words, but her gaze is soft and so are her hands, when she reaches one out to Jeongguk’s forearm. “I think you had a rougher time than I did. Rest up, I’ll get breakfast.”

“Sooyoung-ah,” Jeongguk frowns.

“Seriously.” The smile she flashes is tiny and screams of exhaustion, but it reaches her eyes. “Just trust me, okay?”

Jeongguk sighs. “Alright,” he relents. “I’ll just get an egg sandwich and an ice Americano.”

“I don’t understand how you drink your coffee black, and with ice, too.” She shakes her head and makes to leave the table. “One day your stomach is going to die from all the acidity.”

A summer ago, they had met as the newest additions to the biomedical lab. He guesses it started as a relationship of mutual necessity, two rookies fielding the bigshots that they had to answer to, learning the ropes of the lab, which professors to suck up to, which classes to take and which to avoid with a ten-foot pole.

Having come from the industry, a fresh-faced student like Sooyoung had been, first, a relief, and second, a friend. They had become something—a couple, he guesses, although their relationship is about as low-key as it can get—naturally, without knowing it, before one day, their supervisor had tapped Jeongguk on the shoulder in the middle of his titration practice and asked, “So, what are you and Sooyoung doing for Valentine’s?”

So maybe their relationship was borne out of a need to survive in the harsh STEM field at first, but Jeongguk thinks he knows Sooyoung well enough to say that she is a good person. He is glad for that, even if he admits to being a shitty boyfriend.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Sooyoung asks, settling his iced coffee down in front of him.

“Thank you,” Jeongguk replies. “And I’m not really thinking at all, at this point. Just exhausted.”

“Same,” Sooyoung agrees.

She really does look tired. Graduate school is a whole new ball game compared to the undergraduate years, where you could basically fuck around with few consequences. Sooyoung had entered straight from her last year of undergrad, fresh-faced and eager to learn, but now, the dark circles are permanent imprints under her eyes, and her wrists have angry red marks from the imprint of latex. Even though she is as bright as before, her voice is heavier now, and Jeongguk thinks she has aged ten years in one.

“Before I forget, I wanted to tell you,” she says, as the server places their sandwiches on the table, “I’ll be travelling to Japan in a week.”

“Nice.” Jeongguk likes Japan, even though he hasn’t been. He wants to go, someday. “With the girls?”

“Yeah,” she nods. “We’re roadtripping around Hokkaido for two weeks, then spending another two in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.”

“Shit, that sounds so good.” He’s jealous, he admits. One of the perks of having friends who are still studying meant that everyone had the same breaks, and that was a luxury he did not have. “You sure about that roadtrip part, though? I’m pretty sure you almost crashed into a stop sign the other day.”

She narrows her eyes and throws a packet of sugar in his direction. “Rude.”

“Kidding, kidding,” he laughs.

“I’m not driving anyway,” she scoffs. “Jiyeon’s driven in Japan before, so she’ll be our resident chauffeur. Try not to destroy the lab while I’m gone.”

“Oh, fuck, that’s true.” Without Sooyoung around, Jeongguk is practically helming the project on his own. “If you come back and find that you are short of a lab partner, know that I died in peace, at my home *base*.”

“...was that a pun?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s not even a chemistry lab,” she replies, voice aghast.

“Anyway,” Jeongguk continues, “how’d Prof Lee even approve your holiday? A month is pretty long.”

“Yeah, that’s why we’re kind of rushing the batches now,” she admits. “My fault, sorry. But that also means that you don’t have to run any tests while I’m gone. I think he’s going to self-declare a vacation for the lab.”

“Seriously?” Suddenly the world is brighter, his skin is clearer, and all is good in the world. “No lab work for a month?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Sooyoung grins. “What are you doing for summer, anyway? I feel like we’ve barely gone out together—and *no*, doing lab work doesn’t count as a date, Jeon Jeongguk—and I have a feeling you’ve just been lazing around playing Overwatch all day. Is Widowmaker really that hot?”

Jeongguk blushes. Sooyoung knows him too well, a consequence of spending way too much time together.

“I can’t believe you have so little faith in me.” He shakes his head in mock disappointment. “And, yes, Widowmaker really is that hot, you take your Hanzo main and exit from the back, thank you.”

Sooyoung raises a brow.

“Yes, I’ve been playing Overwatch,” he sighs. “But I’ve also been doing other stuff, okay. I got a dance gig. Um, on Thursday, I subbed in for my friend’s dance class. I’ll probably be doing that every week for the next few months.”

“A dance class?”

“Yeah, at Big Hit. Namjoon-hyung and Yoongi-hyung’s company? I think I’ve mentioned them to you before.”

“Right, the music production thing,” Sooyoung nods, although the playful look has fallen from her face and her words sound inexplicably sombre. “I think you’ve mentioned it once or twice.”

“Yeah, it was pretty fun,” Jeongguk says.

And this is when the conversation falls flat.

“Oppa, you know, before we got together, I said that trust it important to me in a relationship, right?” she begins. “I’m a bit disappointed you didn’t tell me you got a job, or that you even started dancing again.”

“Oh.”

“As in, don’t take this the wrong way, or anything,” she rushes, fumbling a bit. “It’s just—it’s kind of frustrating to not know what your boyfriend is up to. I don’t need to know every single thing that you’re doing, but knowing that you’ve got a gig or that you’re getting back into something that used to be a big part of your life—that would be nice, you know?”

“I mean, you talk about Namjoon-hyung and Yoongi-hyung. I know there’s a Hoseok and Jimin somewhere too, so I know they’re your closest friends, but I’ve never even met them, and we’ve been dating for four months. Oppa, I didn’t even know you had a *stepbrother* until you came riding in on his motorbike.”

How is he supposed to respond?

Sooyoung calling him out like that has his stomach churning, his throat closing up, but in the back of it, through the haze of nerves, is the understanding that she makes a lot of sense. She makes too much sense, and the fact that he had been inadvertently shutting her out of his life outside of the lab was one that he couldn’t refute.

He’d met her friends before, the ones that she was going to Japan with, a ragtag group of biomedical enthusiasts who’d all entered grad school together. He had met her parents and gone to her book club meetings. She had welcome him into her life with open arms.

But for his own life, there was some sort of invisible wall propped up between the two of them, one that he was terrified of tampering with, because what if, just *what if*—

“I’m sorry,” Jeongguk says, voice small as he plays with the straw of his Americano. “I’m—I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s just—since we agreed to talk to each other about stuff like this, I figured I would get it out of the way,” she shrugs. “It just kinda sucks, and whenever I talk about this kind of thing, I get the feeling like you’re going to run away. One step forward, ten steps back.”

He has said this before, and he will say it again: Sooyoung knows him too well.

“I’ll work harder.” He can’t even muster up a proper reply.

At the very least, it looks like Sooyoung knows he is trying his best, and for that, he is grateful.

“So will I.”

“I brought lunch,” Jeongguk says, practically tripping over himself as he rushes into the reception area. July is unforgiving and all he wants is to sit down and swathe in air conditioning. “Naengmyeon, from down the street.”

Jeongguk likes to pride himself in tackling his problems head-on. But when Sooyoung called him out, it wasn’t much of a shock. Maybe the thought that he was a shitty boyfriend, that he has still closed himself off from her even after so many months, brewed in his mind all this time. The thought had been there, but so was the mantra: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. If Sooyoung didn’t say anything and he didn’t say anything, maybe, just maybe, the problem would go away. You can’t face something head-on when it’s not even there to begin with.

But that was the problem. They had spent the rest of their breakfast in relative silence, Jeongguk mulling over whatever she had said, and Sooyoung, for the most part, nursing her sandwich with relative enthusiasm, as if Jeongguk wasn’t acting like an emotionally constipated teenager.

This always happens, he realises. Someone gets close, and he doesn’t even have to put up any defenses, because they were already erected to begin with, strong and unwavering.

“Thanks,” Taehyung says, grabbing the takeout boxes from Jeongguk. He tilts his head to a side. “What’s up with you? Looks like you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

Jeongguk shakes his head and sits down on the sofa. “No, nothing.”

So, yes, it may be cowardly of him to run away from his problems like this. And he hates it. He hates that he can't deal with it any other way, because for so long, he hasn't had to deal with conflict at all. In his defense, he had told Sooyoung that he would try his best—to give him time, and that there is a past that he hasn't told her about. To give him that one month when she is in Japan and he, somewhere in Seoul, maybe, so that he can think, and become a better person. (Because how the hell had he ended up with someone like Sooyoung? Anyone with half an eye can see that she's too good for him.)

"You're lying, but okay." Taehyung comes out from behind the counter and settles down on the sofa. "It's so fucking hot out today."

"You've been in this cosy little office all day, you've got no right to complain."

"Yeah, yeah."

He has been texting Taehyung. Jeongguk's visits to the office are more frequent now, always joining Taehyung, Yoongi, and Namjoon for lunch before sneaking in to colonise the empty studio and choreograph something for a future class, or just for fun. Some days he catches Hoseok there and prods him until he relents and teaches Jeongguk some of the choreography for his recital piece.

To say that he's become more comfortable with Taehyung in his life is an understatement. He has been spending too much time with him and the rest of his hyungs to say so otherwise. (Given how he ghosts them during the entire school term, he thinks he is making up for it pretty well now.) It's true, he admits, that Taehyung is still just as attractive to him now as he was five years ago. You'd have to be blind not to see that Taehyung is handsome, all dusky golden skin and bright eyes.

But maybe this was the part they'd skipped over: that maybe, just maybe, sharing a meal of naengmyeon and dumplings is just as exciting as trespassing into a school at night time and being chased away by security guards.

"You finally brought the guitar," Taehyung says, nodding toward the black gig case. "I thought you were gonna pretend you never offered and keep it for yourself."

"Well, I can't say that I didn't—"

"Okay, no, shh." Taehyung presses a palm over Jeongguk's mouth,

and it dawns on Jeongguk that it has been years, but Taehyung's hands are still large and warm. He almost sticks out a tongue to lick at Taehyung's rough palm. "Let me pretend you're still this kind-hearted little angel."

"Little?"

"Of course, that's what you get out of it," Taehyung sighs, then laughs into his noodles. He pops a dumpling into his mouth and lets out a moan that would be censored on most television channels. "These are so good."

"Mm."

"I'll teach you how to play guitar later," Taehyung promises. "The studio's empty until your class with the kids, so we have a good four hours to fuck around."

The thoughts that pop into Jeongguk's head are unbidden, and he banishes them immediately. No, no. The past remains in the past. The past should not be dug up. They are friends now, and he's not about to ruin anything by calling up unwanted memories.

"Sounds good," Jeongguk nods. "Maybe you can show me how you work with production if there's time."

Taehyung's eyes light up and he almost jumps up in his seat. "I've been sneaking into Yoongi-hyung's studio—oh, god, please don't tell him, he would kill me—because he just got a new Mac and doesn't know how to deactivate the guest account, and he just got the latest version of FL Studio. It's kind of confusing but I'm getting the hang of it, I think, I made this short thing with the MIDI the other day but forgot to bring a thumbdrive so I couldn't save it."

An excited little puppy, that's what he is, Jeongguk thinks. All sweater paws in spite of the heat and floppy hair as he practically bounces up and down, waxing lyrical about the gear in Yoongi's studio.

Later, after they are full and happy from noodles and dumplings, they settle in a corner of the dance studio with the guitar.

"Does she have a name?" Taehyung asks. He tucks his hands behind his back and stands three feet away, but he's standing on the balls of his feet and Jeongguk has to hold back a grin. "Does she?"

"No, why would I name a guitar?" Jeongguk unzips the case and takes

the guitar out. It's a light shade of birch wood, matte, and, to be honest, a little small. "Besides, how do you know it's a female?"

"Gut feeling," Taehyung shrugs. He holds his hands out. "Can I?"

"Go for it."

Taehyung places one hand on the neck of the guitar and the other on the body, cradles it so gently it's almost as if he is holding a baby. His fingers are long, Jeongguk realises, wrapping around the entire neck of the guitar with ease, naturally tucking the guitar under his arm and close to his body, instinct kicking in.

"I'll name her 'Yeontan'," Taehyung whispers. He grins. "Fitting, right?"

"Uh, no?" Jeongguk shakes his head and laughs. "I don't know if you can tell, but her colour is the complete opposite of charcoal."

"That's what makes the name cool." Taehyung beams, and Jeongguk can't bear to reply.

Taehyung fiddles around with Yeontan for a few minutes. She's a little too small for him, but when Jeongguk points that out, Taehyung dismisses it, saying that smaller guitars are easier to play with anyway.

The guitar had been sitting in a corner of Jeongguk's dorm, collecting dust for the better part of six months. Even to Jeongguk's untrained ear, the strings sound slightly wonky, the metal even starting to brown in some parts. But despite it all, Taehyung still plays the guitar with wide eyes and a smile playing on his face, a kid with a new toy.

"You really like playing the guitar, don't you?" Jeongguk asks, shuffling back against the wall. Watching Taehyung, he hadn't realised that he was starting to lean forward.

"Well, of course," Taehyung shrugs. "It's really fun. You're seriously okay with giving this to me?"

"Not like I know how to play it anyway."

"I can teach you," Taehyung suggests. Jeongguk hums in agreement, but insists that Taehyung take the guitar, extends it like a peace offering. "There's this song I found recently. You know how, when you get to a certain part of Youtube, all the recommendations become

gold?”

“Uh, kind of?”

“This song is ten years old, or something. But it’s really good.”

Taehyung begins playing, long fingers plucking over metal strings. (Even after playing around for only twenty minutes, the pads of his fingertips are already home to angry, red marks.) The riff is almost—almost familiar, but Jeongguk is sure he hasn’t heard it before. The notes are light and sweet, something nostalgic. A long-lost autumn trembling with the pitch.

And then Taehyung starts singing, and Jeongguk can’t tear his eyes away. His baritone is just as deep and rich as Jeongguk remembers, from that one night in Hongdae all those years ago, a velvet mix of warm chocolate and honey.

“기분 좋은 설레임, 운동화 끈을 매고서,” he croons, “떠나는 내 뒷모습 초라해 보이지만.”

His high notes are a bit shaky, voice rusty, like he hadn’t used the muscle in a while. He sings like he is toeing a tightrope, slow and steady, almost as if he is holding back. At some point, his eyelids flutter close and the music settles and *he* settles. And even if everything sounds distinctly raw and unpolished, sound echoing through the tiny dance studio they have huddled in, there is a gentle calm that fills the air.

What a sight this is, Jeongguk thinks: Taehyung’s deep, heavy voice trembling against the high, light notes from the guitar. Eyes closed, fingers dancing over strings, body hunched into the instrument like his life depended on it.

“That was—that was really good,” Jeongguk manages to croak out, a good ten, twenty seconds after Taehyung has finished and silence hung between them.

“Really?” Taehyung cracks a goofy smile. “Honestly, I haven’t touched a guitar or sang in so long. Everything feels so rusty.”

“I mean, yeah, you were a bit shaky here and there, but it was really good.”

“Fly away.” When he sees Jeongguk’s knitted brows, he clarifies, “The song. It’s *‘Fly Away’* by Jang Yunju.” He pulls up his phone and fiddles

with it for a while. “Wow, it was released in 2008. That’s forever ago.”

“What was I even doing in 2008?” Jeongguk stretches his legs out and sinks to the ground. “I was eleven.”

“Kid version Jeon Jeongguk,” Taehyung muses. “Must’ve been a sight.”

If a foetus Jeon Jeongguk was a sight, then Taehyung must have been otherworldly, Jeongguk thinks. Taehyung doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“Don’t worry, you’re still a sight,” Taehyung laughs, like he doesn’t know that those words make Jeongguk’s heart do somersaults in his chest.

The door creaks open.

“Oh, sorry, we didn’t know you guys were using the studio,” someone says.

“It’s alright, Alex.” Taehyung waves the kid in. “We’re pretty much done anyway.”

Another head pops into sight. “What are you guys doing?” they ask, followed by a, “Oh my god, is that a guitar?”

Before he can even process what is going on, Jeongguk is surrounded by a nest of half a dozen trainees. They fawn over the guitar and pester Taehyung until he gives in with a loud, exaggerated sigh, and plays a short song for them. A smattering of polite applause follows the end of the song, followed by multiple boys begging Taehyung to teach them, one even trying to bribe him with fried chicken.

“What about you, Jeon-seonsaengnim?” A boy with hair so bleached it shines white underneath the studio lights turns to face Jeongguk—Sangwoo, he recalls. “Do you play too?”

“No, but Tae-hyung here promised to teach me.”

“So you’ll teach Jeon-ssaem but not us,” Fire Engine Hair boy whines.

A bout of hankering later, Taehyung relents yet again. Jeongguk is beginning to realise that Taehyung has a gigantic soft spot for the boys, and it’s not hard to see why—they are young, eyes bright, hearts warm, and heads in the right place. The bunch of them play around

like they were borne from the same parents and not thrown together by a luck of draw.

“What are you guys doing down so early?” Jeongguk asks. The excitement over Taehyung’s new toy has subsided, and the trainees mill about, eyes trained on their phones.

“We were gonna use the studio for extra practice,” Sangwoo replies. He nods toward Jihoon plugging his phone into the speakers. “Evaluations are soon, so everyone’s on edge. Ssaem, do you mind helping us?”

Jeongguk looks toward Taehyung. He had been looking forward to watching Taehyung do his magic in the recording studio.

“It’s alright,” Taehyung says, apparently able to read Jeongguk’s mind. “You go ahead and help the kids. I’ll show you another time.”

“And teach me guitar, too?”

Taehyung chuckles. “Yes, that too.”

This is how Jeongguk finds himself adopting twelve kids—six trainees had entered at first, but apparently word of mouth spreads fast, and the rest soon filed in after—helping them adjust their angles, teaching them how to stretch further so their isolations can be that much cleaner.

He ends up adopting a fully-grown man, too, one who claims he has two left feet but still wants to learn a body wave. (“I’ll trade you, body wave for guitar lessons.”) And, to be honest, he can’t say he minds it all that much.

Jeongguk is glad for the evening breeze in the thick of summer. The rooftop, as always, is a place of solace, and he has never felt as grateful for it as he does now, after working with the trainees for a good six hours.

“You’ve worked hard.” He can’t say he’s surprised that Taehyung has

found him. "The kids are very eager."

"I don't know how they have so much energy," Jeongguk admits. "I don't even know if I had that much energy at their age."

The sun is starting to sink beneath the horizon; in the metropolis of Seoul, though, it's not rolling hills or the edge of the sea that it hides behind, but building upon building, street upon street. Everything is already coloured a dusky orange, brightness muted by the clouds dotting the sky and the smoke from Jeongguk's cigarette.

"Every time you're up here, you're smoking." More of a statement than a question, one that Jeongguk can't refute. "You never smoked so much."

"Five years changes people," Jeongguk says.

"I told myself I would quit, before I started travelling." Taehyung joins him, leans against the railings and lights up his own cigarette. "Stupid choice. Smoking helped me make friends while on the road, and they can be so cheap in some places. Did you know Camels are *sixty cents* in Myanmar?"

Jeongguk raises his brows. "Now I do."

"I came back hating the taste of it. You can only smoke so much before getting sick of it." Taehyung breathes in deep, and when smoke chases from his mouth, his eyes follows the trail it leaves behind. "But I went back to it, eventually. Old habits die hard and all that."

Then he turns to Jeongguk, gaze dark with intent. "There's one thing I wanted to ask you."

It's unnerving. Taehyung's stare pierces through Jeongguk, like he's trying to break him apart just so he can figure out how to fit the pieces back together. Like Jeongguk is a puzzle he can't make sense of, and the only way to solve it is to throw him to the dogs.

"I thought you were gay," Taehyung begins, "but you have a girlfriend."

A pause. Jeongguk expected this.

"Well, people change." He stubs his cigarette and watches the ashes flutter to the street below, only for them to catch on the windowsill instead. "It's been five years."

“Yeah.” Taehyung tears his gaze away from Jeongguk. “Tell me about how you guys got together. Another time, though, when you’re not dead-tired.”

Jeongguk nods and stares out into the city. Maybe if he looks hard enough, he can understand what Taehyung finds so interesting about grey building upon grey building.

And then, cutting through the thick silence of a summer evening, his phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Jeongguk? Is this you?”

“Eomma?” he chokes out.

How long has it been, since he last heard his mother’s voice? When was the last time he’d gone home for dinner? His varsity jacket must still be hanging on the chair from then.

“How are you doing?” she asks, voice strained, and he doesn’t need to see her face to know that they are more lined with wrinkles now, crow’s feet around her eyes deeper than before. “How was your semester?”

“Good, it was good,” Jeongguk replies. He turns away from Taehyung and pins his gaze on the ugly metal door that leads up to the rooftop. “I’ll go home for dinner soon.”

“That’s good to hear,” she replies, a smile in her voice. “Actually, your father and I wanted to ask—do you want to go on a trip to Jeju with us?”

“Jeju?”

“Yes, a family trip to Jeju, just the four of us.”

Four of them?

Jeongguk looks at Taehyung, the slope of his nose a silhouette against the setting sun, brown hair ruffled in the wind. Did he know about this?

“Jeongguk?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Taehyung makes to leave and beckons Jeongguk with a smirk and a tilt of his head, hands swallowed by the sleeves of his sweater, a cigarette pack sticking out from his back pocket. Against the now-purple sky, he looked like the poster boy for everything your parents warned you to stay away from.

For the past few weeks, Jeongguk had been able to ignore the fact that Taehyung was his stepbrother. (Taehyung hadn't just been any old summer flame, and it seems the world was out to remind him.) But life always comes back to bite you in the ass, and Jeongguk can only run away for so long. His stomach churns as he follows Taehyung back down and he tells himself, he will settle this once and for all.

Chapter End Notes

the song is [fly away by jang yunju](#) and it's beautiful

five years later and jeongguk is still shit at dealing with ppl and r/ships, but is that surprising??? Welp

ok i will update this author's note soon because i'm drowning and need to sleep ahha

Chapter 4: july 2020, iii

“Hyung, do you think I’m a bad person?”

No answer.

Jeongguk inches forward from the couch and jabs at the space between Yoongi’s neck and collarbone, where pale skin sank into the hollow. He doesn’t need to see Yoongi’s face to know that his mouth is pulled tight and long across his face. The next second, his hyung takes his headphones off and spins around to face Jeongguk.

“What is it?”

“Hyung, do you think I’m a bad person?” Jeongguk asks, this time more insistent, a crack to his words.

“I’m not a counsellor,” Yoongi replies. He sighs. “Why’d you even think that?”

“Sooyoung pointed out something.” Jeongguk flops down onto the couch and fiddles with the Kumamon cushion. He has been finding solace in Yoongi’s studio these days: ashtrays, obnoxious cushions, and everything else that came with Yoongi. “I haven’t been telling her anything. She didn’t know I started dancing again, she didn’t even know I had a stepbrother.”

“She didn’t know, or you didn’t tell her?”

“The second one.” He stares at a spot on the ceiling. Maybe if he glares hard enough his problems will all go away. “I didn’t even realise I was doing it.”

“It’s fine to want your own space,” Yoongi says. He walks over and kicks Jeongguk’s thigh, and the younger shifts to the side to make room for him. “Jimin and Hoseok don’t know everything about me, either. But trust is important in a relationship, you know that, right?”

“She said that too,” Jeongguk mumbles.

“How long have you guys been together?”

“Four months.”

“If it’s been four months and you haven’t opened up to her or haven’t

felt like you wanted to open up to her, then maybe you need to re-evaluate this — whatever this is,” Yoongi gestures. “I don’t think you’re a bad person. Maybe you’re just a bad boyfriend.”

“Wow, that’s really reassuring, thank you,” Jeongguk draws.

Yoongi shrugs. “Well, you asked.”

Maybe Yoongi has a point. He and Sooyoung work well together; they’d clicked instantly, and they have similar interests. She’s probably one of the most understanding people he can find. And yet, he hasn’t found it in himself to trust her enough to tell her even the simplest things, not even after spending every day together for the past few months. If he gives himself a bit of leeway, Sooyoung is his first official relationship —of sorts, hook-ups and friends with benefits and situations-that-shall-not-be-named don’t really count, do they?— and so maybe he’s just inexperienced.

But even the most inexperienced people should be able to *trust* , at the very least. Jeongguk can talk to Yoongi, to Jimin. Hell, he can talk to Taehyung, whom he hasn’t seen for years.

The problem is with himself. He’s sure of it. Why is it that he can’t open up the way the she has? Was it some sort of deep-seated insecurity? Some kind of guilt that’s been riding on his shoulders this entire time, that he doesn’t know about? Or maybe he’s just so disconnected from his emotions that he can’t bring himself to so much as acknowledge them?

“A relationship needs both parties to work together, and to trust each other,” Yoongi starts. And, as direct as he always is, he continues, “If you can’t do that, I think you need to ask yourself if you’re ready for it.”

“That’s all for today,” Jeongguk says. “But before you leave, three sets of thirty pushups.”

The kids let out a chorus of groans, but Jeongguk bribes them with offers of odeng right after. Today’s lesson was strange; it’s been a while since he felt like he was fumbling around, and even the choreography was a hastily drawn up one. After his talk with Yoongi,

he'd been chased out of the room, because "a producer needs his beauty sleep", and his mind had been racing with too many thoughts to even think about fighting back.

And so it went, a few days of mulling over something, a small seed of doubt that grew and rooted itself firmly in his chest. It made his head hurt, made his heart hurt. By the time Thursday morning rolled around, he still hadn't created a new choreography to teach the kids.

"Twenty-nine, thirty." The boys collapse onto the ground, sweat sticking to the floor. Jihoon pipes up, "Ssaem, odeng, please?"

"Alright, alright," Jeongguk laughs, despite it all. "You guys wait here and I'll be back in ten minutes."

So maybe he really does need to think things over, he wonders, as he finds his way to the nearest odeng stand. If even Yoongi thinks so — and Yoongi, for all his grumpiness and crusty exterior, gives some damn good advice—then perhaps it's something Jeongguk should seriously consider. Sooyoung had texted him a half hour ago, a bright blue notification on his lock screen, but instead of a surge of happiness or anticipation, all he felt was dread. If that wasn't a sign, Jeongguk doesn't know what is.

This is how it starts, isn't it, Jeongguk thinks. A grain of apprehension, the slight hesitation before opening your partner's message. And, as always, Jeongguk would have no fucking way of dealing with this because—

"Hey, what are you up to?"

Taehyung's voice, deep gold and warm honey, drags him out of his internal monologue.

"You're about to walk into a pole," Taehyung laughs, the slightest hint of confusion in his voice, like he was worried that Jeongguk was genuinely about to dive into the middle of a busy road. "Are you alright?"

Breathe , Jeongguk thinks to himself.

"Yeah, I'm good," he says. He lifts up the bag of odeng and points at it as triumphantly as he can, considering he was seconds away from facepalming into a wall. "Just bought some odeng for the kids."

"*The kids* ." Taehyung wipes fake tears away from the corners of his

eyes. He grins, eyes twinkling, and, for a moment, Jeongguk's chest tightens. "You sound like Yoongi-hyung and Namjoon-hyung now."

Jeongguk laughs nervously, tucking his free hand into a pocket. He invites Taehyung to join them for odeng, which he politely declines, claiming he has some tteokbokki to buy. And as he walks back to the studio with an armful of fishcakes and a heart full of—well, of something, he guesses, a blend of fullness and confusion and anticipation—he looks up at the sky, and wonders when the summer heat had become so warm.

Sooyoung comes back a few days before Jeongguk has to leave for Jeju. The lab is still closed, courtesy of their supervisor traipsing off to yet another European country for a conference, so the first time they meet again is not at the lab, but at the Japanese place next to the lab. Jeongguk considers this a plus.

"How was Japan?" Jeongguk asks. Sooyoung is tanner, he thinks. Must be the sun. "Why'd you suggest a Japanese place when you've just come back from there?"

She smiles. "It doesn't matter, really." The waiter arrives then, setting a plate of tempura soba in front of her and a bowl of gyudon for Jeongguk. "Let's eat first, and then you can tell me what you've been up to."

And so Jeongguk does. He tells her about the past few weeks: about how the kids train their heart out and collapse to the ground, a sweaty heap, only to clamber all over him when he offers them skewers; about how he's been hanging out with his hyungs more often now, crashing Yoongi's studio when he wants to; about how he's going to Jeju with his family, even though they're not really close.

"You never really did talk much about your family," Sooyoung muses. She's stopped eating, eyes tracing the remnants of her food as if they were constellations. "So it's you, your mum, your stepdad, and your stepbrother?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"How's he, by the way? Taehyung, right?" Sooyoung asks. The grey,

steely look from before is gone and replaced with genuine curiosity. “He was nice the last time we met.”

It takes a couple of seconds before Jeongguk is able to breathe again. Objectively, this situation is kind of funny: his girlfriend asking about his stepbrother, who happens to be his ex-sort-of-boyfriend. A little bit like *deja vu*, like the one time he’d hopped off Taehyung’s bike, hair still in his face, only to be greeted with Sooyoung’s apprehensive smile.

“He’s doing well,” Jeongguk replies. They’ve been seeing each other pretty often since Jeongguk is now teaching the kids regularly. It’s gotten easier, even if the clench of his heart is just as tight as before. “He works as the receptionist at Yoongi-hyung and Namjoon-hyung’s studio, so I see him whenever I’m there.”

“Oh, he does?” She takes a sip of water and leans back into her chair, folds her arms around her waist and tucks her chin under. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah.”

“Japan was really fun.” Sooyoung shifts again, this time pushing her chair forward and resting her forearms on the edge of the table. “Hokkaido was great, it’s much cooler than Seoul. And the lavender fields were really pretty.” She pulls out her phone and swipes through for a few seconds, before showing Jeongguk the screen. “This was in Furano.”

“Oh, that’s really nice,” Jeongguk smiles. Sooyoung in a beret and a sundress, standing in the middle of a field of lavenders. A sea of purple with a small, lithe girl grinning in the center. He thinks he hasn’t seen her this happy in a while. “You look really happy.”

“I was,” she agrees. “I sent you that photo right after I took it, though. You don’t remember.”

The last part comes out as a statement, not a question. Jeongguk jolts and frantically trawls through his memory of the past few weeks. He remembers seeing Sooyoung’s messages, replying a couple of them, but, somehow, not much of anything—not the conversations, not any photos they might’ve exchanged—stand out. Fuck.

“Shit, I’m—” Jeongguk tries. “I’m sorry.”

He bites his bottom lip, fingers curling into the fabric of his trousers,

and, god, there's a lump in his throat he just can't get rid of. A stone weighing in his stomach, a pit of dread.

Sooyoung looks at him for a moment, a soft gaze he doesn't deserve. Then she sighs, leans back in her chair with palms folded over each other on her lap. Breathes deep and looks at Jeongguk straight in the eye.

"A while ago, we both agreed to try harder. That you would share more with me and that we would trust each other more, and try to make this work." Her voice is heavy, a usually bright lilt now replaced with the weight of finality and resignation. And, underneath it all, a slight tremor. "But I don't see you trying at all."

"I—"

"It's not your fault," Sooyoung rushes, face now slightly pink. "Well, it actually is. But, what I'm seeing now is that if you're not putting in the effort, then I don't see how this relationship could be going anywhere." She tucks her hair behind her ears, and on her lobes is a new set of earrings Jeongguk has not seen before. A pair of tiny Sapporo beer bottles glinting gold. "I still like you as a friend and we're still working together in the lab, but I don't think we should be involved romantically."

Jeongguk wants to crawl into a hole and die.

"So, this means you're breaking up with me?"

"Yes, I am."

He slumps into his chair, all the tension and dread finally sinking into his body. But, it's strange—he's not really that upset or frustrated, he can't say he hasn't seen this coming, and behind all the guilt and disappointment, is a slight sliver of relief. And he hates himself for it.

"I'm sorry," Jeongguk murmurs. His palms have curled into fists, now, pulling taut at the ends of his shirt. "I'm sorry I was such a shitty boyfriend. I—I've been talking to my hyungs, thinking a bit, and I don't think I'm ready for a relationship." He breathes. "But, if you will have me, I would like to continue being your friend."

"Of course I will." Sooyoung's eyes soften and the small smile she gives him more pitying than anything. "If you don't mind me asking, why are you not ready?"

Jeongguk glares at his empty bowl like he wants to drill holes into it.

“I don’t know,” he answers. But then he thinks of honey skin and a chocolate baritone and glimmering eyes, and he thinks, maybe, there are some things he still needs to sort out.

There are too many people. It’s a mess, Jeongguk thinks, domestic and foreign tourists alike buzzing around with their too-big suitcases and ugly neon tracksuits. He trails behind his mum and stepdad, all of them headed for the check-in counter, and almost knocks over a pair of siblings playing some convoluted game of tag in the middle of the airport.

Jeongguk hates airports.

“Are you alright?” his mum asks. In the years since, she has softened, he thinks. Instead of hardening her, the years have added a roundness to her sharp edges. “You look sick.”

“Yeah, do you need water?” Taehyung chimes in.

Jeongguk shakes his head. “I’m fine.” He’s being honest. The boarding gate is not nearly half as bad as the check-in counters. He gets to sit down and willfully ignore the chaos that is going on around him. At least, until they are called to actually board the flight, and it’s a mess of pushing and shoving and elbowing to get onto the plane first.

Jeongguk hates airports, but he hates flights even more.

They board the flight, somewhere in the middle of the pack, after the business class passengers and families have already settled in. His head is still a mess—after Sooyoung had broken up with him, he’d headed back home and stared at the ceiling for hours, trying to figure out why exactly he felt so weird. Why he still feels so weird. What else is he feeling, and how was he supposed to deal with it from now on. Hours of contemplation later, he realised that he always came back to one answer, one unresolved thread from his past. In his younger days, he’d preferred to deal with things head-on; as college and young adult life weathered him down, he became gradually more okay with loose ends.

And that's his current dilemma. A ghost from his past, yet a light in his present, trails in front of him as they enter the cabin. If he could, Jeongguk would sit with his mum, or even his stepdad, as long as he could escape. As long as he could stare out the window and will his problems away.

But that's the problem, isn't it? He wants to escape because he knows what the problem is, and he knows how he should deal with it. He's just too weak. He's a coward.

"Do you want the window or the aisle?" Taehyung asks. Of course his mum and stepdad were going to sit together. He's stupid for ever anticipating otherwise. "I'm cool with either."

"I'll take the window, then," Jeongguk says. That way, at least he can still stare resolutely out at the sky.

They settle into a lull: Taehyung taking a short nap, hugging his jacket to his chest, and Jeongguk gazing outside with his cheek on his palm. It's kind of strange, how they are now. Maybe it's the fact that they only ever meet at the studio, at a workplace, that it has become easier to numb their interactions from something that crackles and sizzles to a simple, polite transaction, even if Jeongguk's heart still skips a beat every time Taehyung smiles. The fact that they have settled into something like this—something comfortable, something easy—despite all that they'd gone through half a decade back—is kind of a miracle.

A weight falls on his shoulder. He turns, and there is Taehyung, his cheek pressing against the jut of Jeongguk's shoulder, eyelashes skimming the top of his cheekbones. The rise and fall of his chest with each inhale, exhale.

And there it is, the slow warmth spreading from Jeongguk's chest to the tips of his toes and fingers, the sudden urge to hold.

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